Jacques Camatte and the missing link of contemporary social criticism

by F. Corriente

The work of Jacques Camatte, which appeared in successive series of the review *Invariance*[1] from 1968 to 2002, is truly staggering, due not only to the scope, the richness and the variety of its subject matter, but also to the scant circulation it seems to have enjoyed. In itself, the first series of the review, dedicated for the most part to the colossal task of publishing and analyzing unreleased or unavailable writings of the young Marx and the "communist left" groupings that broke with the Third International (the German KAPD, Gorter, Pannekoek, Bordiga), should have more than sufficed to award *Invariance* and its main figurehead an outstanding place in the contemporary landscape of social critique. If we add to this the extensive and innovative study that Camatte published on the famous *Unpublished 6th Chapter of Capital*, (*Invariance* nº 2, 1968) under the title *Capital et Gemeinwesen* (translated in English as *Capital and Community*), not to mention his detailed and thorough analyses on the history of the communist movement, the evolution of contemporary capitalism and the most important social movements of the 1968-77 period, our perplexity and amazement at the lack of awareness regarding Camatte can only increase. Putting to one side the possible role played by the pure and simple incomprehension of his writings, everything points to the origin of this clamorous silence lying in his ruthless analysis of the logic pervading activist "rackets"[2] and his comprehensive critique of politics, contained in such enlightening texts as "Mai-Juin 1968: théorie et action (1968)", "Perspectives" (1969), "On organization" (1969) or "Transition" (1970). As if this were not enough —and as a supplementary reason for animadversion and censure— these writings, already highly controversial in themselves, were the first steps of a journey that, far from leading Camatte to a "reaffirmation of the proletarian program", led him to announce that the latter had expired and to subsequently explore not only the forgotten "dead ends" of the revolutionary processes of the 20th century, but the communitarian dimension of the human species' entire past as well.

Nonetheless, and despite the rejection which some of his most unorthodox conclusions have encountered, the fact remains that Camatte's influence has been both wide and varied. The entire French "ultraleft" which emerged following May '68 was marked by it to a greater or lesser extent, and the same applies to the Green and Primitivist anarchist currents that appeared a few years later, now in a context of clear revolutionary ebb (In 1975, Fredy Perlman, for example, translated and published — under the title *The Wandering of Humanity*— two essays in which Camatte delves into the subject of the "presuppositions of capital", that is, the millenarian pre-capitalist legacy of the domestication of nature and humanity which paved the way for the despotism of capital.) In more recent times, exponents of the so-called "communization current" (and particularly groups such as Théorie Communiste and Endnotes), while flatly denying any possibility of "seceding" from the capital relation and therefore rejecting Camatte's exhortation to "leave this world," have openly acknowledged their debt to him.

From the second series onward, *Invariance* —after theorizing the overcoming of the law of value and the subsequent "renouncement of the theory of the proletariat"— embarked upon a course summed up in texts such as "Community and communism in Russia"[3] (1972), "On revolution" (1972) "The Wandering of Humanity" (1973) or "La révolution russe et la théorie du proletariat" (1974), and moved even further away from any and all attempts to bring the "proletarian program" back to life. According to Camatte, the "autonomized" forms of capital (such as fictitious capital) have resulted in the constitution of a

"material community" based on competition between rival gangs which has reabsorbed the opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Consequently, from now on there is no possible opposition to capital but "in its human dimension" (a thesis that concurs to some extent with the analyses of Moishe Postone and the Krisis group[4]).

The end of an era

May 1968 signaled the closure of the historical cycle that had begun in the 1920s with the triumph of counterrevolution in Russia and Germany, and inaugurated the "second proletarian assault against class society" (a rather inconvenient denomination, as it tends to reduce the new cycle to a "corrected and expanded" repetition of the previous one). However, this return of the proletariat to the stage of history, manifested in the riots in American ghettos, the proliferation of wildcat strikes in Europe and a general revolt against work and the commodification of everyday life, paradoxically coincided with the beginning of the end of the autonomous affirmation of the proletariat as a class. In encompassing the totality of daily life, the new revolutionary movement represented, first and foremost, a massive rejection of the proletarian condition. In "Vers la communauté humaine" (1976), Camatte sums up the discontinuity between the two periods as follows:

[...] The most important thing immediately was that we had to deal with a revolutionary movement that did not pose a class dimension, which therefore expressed with utmost clarity the requirement indicated in Origin and Function of the Party Form: a revolution grounded in the human dimension. [...] It could also be considered that the non-affirmation of a classist dimension developed within the dynamics of revolution, since K. Marx had often insisted that the aim of the latter was the suppression of the proletariat, and therefore, the maturity of the movement initiated in May '68 should be affirmed to the extent that the negation of the proletariat was to impose itself increasingly. Thus, what I considered that ought to be foregrounded was not the autonomy of the proletariat, which Potere Operaio, for example, spoke so much about, but rather its negation.

Thus, the first stirrings of the new cycle were simultaneously a crisis of the theoretical premises of the previous cycle and of its entire problematic, starting with the classical conception that advocated various forms of conquest of power —regardless of it whether it was political or economic— by the proletariat.[5] At the same time, however, '68 prompted a vigorous return of the repressed in the guise of a resurrection of the previous cycle's "finest moments" (i.e., the most repressed ones): the movement of the workers' councils, the KAPD, the writings of the young Lukács and Karl Korsch, or the interest in the work of Hegel and Wilhelm Reich. According to Camatte, although this was an inevitable and healthy phenomenon, it was also "an indicator of the fact that people had not grasped the reality of the situation directly, and that the situation itself was unable to give birth to new forms of struggle and other theoretical approaches". ("Against domestication", 1973). In any case, in order for critique to follow through right to its end and reject the inadequacies of the past en bloc, it was necessary for the "undefeated" part of the defeated revolutionary project to return to the present as if to its own home.

What the new era had brought to the fore was not only the critique in acts of the "politicist" or Jacobin conception of revolution, but also of any notion of revolution rooted in the issues involving the management, organization or emancipation of labor:

The May '68 wildcat general strike did not produce any specific organ of worker's management. During Italy's long "rampant May", factory and zone councils, although they testified to the class's capacity for self-organization in regard to its aims [...], did not tend in any way to take over the productive apparatus.

Not even the Polish insurrectional strike of December 1970 showed a clear tendency toward self-management, as opposed to what had happened in Hungary in 1956.[6]

The immediate consequence was the gradual rejection of the theoretical baggage of a generation that, as a reaction against Stalinism, had made the struggle against bureaucracy —whether state, party or union— its fundamental priority. Such was the case of the now-defunct review *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1949-1965), which from its first issue had placed the antagonism between proletariat and bureaucracy at the forefront, and which had considered that the formation of councils in East Berlin (1953), the Hungarian insurrection of 1956 and anti-union strikes on both sides of the Atlantic confirmed its theses.

Contrary to what it may seem at first sight, *S. ou B.*'s point of view remained bogged down in the Trotskyist problematic, which located the center of gravity of the counterrevolution in Russia (and in the labor bureaucracy in general). A comparison, for example, of the analyses developed as early as 1947 by the Johnson-Forest tendency —an American group that, like *S. ou B.*, had emerged from a split within Trotskyism— with Chalieu-Castoriadis's diagnosis, would suffice to realize to what extent the latter had barely scratched the surface of the "bureaucratic phenomenon":[7]

[...] Now, today, the proletariat, on a higher plane, has drawn the ultimate conclusion. Its revolt is not against politics and the distribution of the surplus value. The revolt is against value production itself. It has made its own comprehension of the pivot on which the comprehension of political economy turns. (The Invading Socialist Society, p. 13)

If, back in the day, proving the capitalist character of Russian society, as was done in *S. ou B.*'s article "The Relations of Production in Russia" (May-June 1949), had been a most valuable instrument of theoretical clarification, in the new stage inaugurated by May 1968 it was no longer enough to demonstrate that the USSR was capitalist: now it was also necessary to explain why that was the case without turning the consequences —"bureaucracy" or "the Bolshevik ideology"— into causes. The crux of the matter had shifted elsewhere: what mattered was not so much the nature of Russia as that of *capital* itself (and, consequently, the nature of the proletariat). In 1972, in the epilogue of La Vielle Taupe's reprint of "The Relations of Production in Russia", Pierre Guillame, former member of Socialisme ou Barbarie, listed the consequences of analyzing the Soviet regime in terms of "bureaucratic capitalism":

(indent: [...] the anti-capitalist program was replaced by an anti-bureaucratic program in which self-management, autonomy and democracy played a decisive role. The whole communist conception was thrown into disarray. [...] Bureaucracy is a threat, a permanent human tendency opposed by another human tendency: autonomy.[8])

Unlike *S. ou B.*, which nonetheless exerted a great influence on it, the Situationist International was widely recognized by the May revolt and could boast that its slogans had proven it right. However, the S. I. never understood that this "triumph" owed just as much to its virtues as it did to its limitations (its own and those of May '68). Despite having introduced within the classical forms of the "proletarian program" contents that broke with it —such as the abolition of wage labor and exchange, of classes and the State with no transition whatsoever— and having duly taken stock of the most relevant novelties of the day,[9] the Situationists were unable to discard two conceptions of the previous cycle now reduced to mere incantations: the defense of the absolute power of the workers' councils, and consequently, the access of the proletariat (redefined as an almost universal class of all individuals dispossessed of the use of their lives) to a theory and a consciousness which supposedly were its own but which it had

paradoxically become “separated” from. Hence, the S. I., condemned to repeating itself *ad infinitum* and unable to refine its analyses any further, was doomed in the short term to crisis and dissolution.

Indeed, the ill-fated “question of the subject” had rapidly become — and this was no coincidence — the most glaring Achilles heel which the “new movement” that emerged from ‘68 was to stumble relentlessly against. Years later, Eduardo Subirats would point this out in “A critical approach to ‘History and Class Consciousness’”:[10]

[...] when, in a specific social context in which there is no empirical bearer of resistance to reification [...] the category of the proletariat is programmatically invoked, it becomes an abstract deus ex machina. Such was the case of the use of the concept of the proletariat by the Situationists.[11]

Thus, both for Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and for the Situationists —who had also turned the proletariat into an abstract universal subject— the latter was not defined by its status as “variable capital” within the framework of capitalist production relations, but by its opposition to reification. In any case, it should be noted that when —almost three decades later— Moishe Postone described the historical subject of Lukács as a collective version of the bourgeois subject constituting itself and the world through labor, he was merely completing the already very advanced portrait drawn by Subirats: “Lukács cannot endow his representation of the proletariat with any other empirical attributes than those of the classic-modern subject of domination.” (*Contra la razón destructiva*, p. 137).

Thus, although it may be argued that the indeterminacy of the use of the concept of “proletariat” by the S. I. prefigured the “revolt of the new social subjects” and the spread of social conflicts to the field of reproduction, it would soon prove completely unable to account in any way for the absence of the “constitution of an integral social subject harboring critical power against the reified totality of the capitalist system.” (*Contra la razón destructiva*, p. 127)

This does not mean, however, that during those very same years, important theoretical efforts were not being carried out (and not just by Camatte, who had already made more than a few contributions to the question of the proletariat “as subject and as representation”) to get to the bottom of that “absence”:

(indent: The proletariat cannot be a class, because class is still a mode of social existence [...] Class consciousness is the consciousness of people who compete against each other, who struggle, but who close ranks against all who remain outside, in the face of all that is not their class [...] Class is the union of competitors whose general interests are identical and whose particular interests oppose them to one another. It is the war of every bourgeois against everyone else. What is particular about class, as opposed to any other form of social existence, is that it is constituted against an exteriority by people who, in turn, are external to each other. [...] What is particular about the modern proletariat is that it does not constitute a class and cannot constitute one. Proletarians cannot struggle against each other, and they cannot struggle against something external. They are absolutely separated, and that separation leaves nothing outside of itself [...] When proletarians struggle, they do not struggle against something external, against another class; they struggle against that separation, they struggle against the proletariat.[12])

As early as 1948, C.L.R. James, in “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States”, had been inspired by Lenin’s position on the right of national self-determination to emphasize (in the American context and in defense of the independent and autonomous character of the civil

rights movement) the importance of internal divisions within the working class (in this case ethnic ones, to which, from the 1970s onward, sexual and generational ones were to be added):

What Lenin is saying is that although the fundamental force is the proletariat, although these groups are powerless, although the proletariat has got to lead them, it does not by any means follow that they cannot do anything until the proletariat actually comes forward to lead them. He says exactly the opposite is the case. They, by their agitation, resistance and the political developments that they can initiate, can be the means whereby the proletariat is brought on to the scene. Not always, and every time, not the sole means, but one of the means. That is what we have to get clear.

Therefore, the "unity" of the proletariat was by no means the prerequisite of revolutionary activity; on the contrary, this unity, as Camatte would say in "The KAPD and the Proletarian Movement" (1971):

[...] can only be achieved after a tenacious and resolute struggle, with no concessions, against capital and, to an extent, by a struggle within the universal class itself.

From there to implicitly admitting the potential relevance of movements and struggles that do not explicitly question the capitalist system (as in the case of the "Arab Spring" and other contemporary movements, for example) there is but one step, which implies a further overthrowing of the "proletariat as representation", although in a diametrically opposed sense to that posited by Postone and "value critique", for whom such movements constitute, at best, no more than "belated modernization attempts". For Camatte, on the contrary:

To say that any revolutionary social movement can only foster counterrevolution from the moment that the Western proletariat does nothing, is to wish to make everything revolve around the West; it is Eurocentrism or the justification of colonialism, etc.... and moreover, it is to pay scant attention to the tragic impasse in which a multitude of men and women in the various so-called backward areas find themselves and will find themselves in the future. Finally, it expresses, in the most acute way possible, the inversion of the proposition "the proletariat does not have to await any Messiah" to "the proletariat is the new Messiah to be awaited". ("Vers la communauté humaine", 1976)

But let's backtrack to the mid-1970s. When they saw that the new "proletarian assault" was coming to a standstill, but that at the same time insubordination was spreading to the totality of the institutions of social reproduction (schools, families, prisons, psychiatric asylums) most of the radical currents of that time focused their attention on these new forms of struggle, which led them to a continual search for "new subjects" that were somehow "outside of" the capitalist system (it is no coincidence that the great revaluation and reassessment of pre-industrial movements of revolt took place at this time), as well as to opposing the proletariat —considered to be the incarnation of a future communist humanity— to the working class, mere variable fraction of capital. In both cases, according to Camatte, the result was the same:

To remain faithful to a concept of proletariat including negativity, we must search for those elements of society that are really revolting against the established order or that, due to their way of life, represent the dissolution of existing society. Hence the theory of Marcuse regarding students and minorities such as the blacks in the United States, but also the theory of different revolutionaries about the marginalized and the excluded, which, in any case, is tantamount to the abandonment of the theory of the proletariat in its classical form.[13]

Thus, instead of taking stock of the actual limits which the movement that began in 1968 had run up against and seeking an explanation in the evolution of the capital relation itself and in the hierarchical segmentation inherent to the proletariat, they blindly forged ahead and interpreted the "new relationships" established in daily life by way of sexual liberation, communes, the critique of the family or various forms of delinquency, as harbingers of the "new society" that was struggling to break forth from the womb of the old, as well as of the increasing presence and rootedness of the veritable "spirit of the age": autonomy.

The elements of a new world tend to reveal themselves continually from the very functioning of the capitalist system [...] The most visible demonstration of this tendency occurs in the new forms of class struggle, and the widening of class conflicts to clashes between the dominators and dominated in all structures of society. [...] The attempts at rejecting trade unions, the underground organization of conflicts, the attempts to make horizontal links between those in struggle, the new attitudes of students, women, homosexuals and so on, the attitude of workers towards work, all these reflect the desire of those concerned to manage their struggle for themselves and by themselves.[14]

However, the heterogeneous components of this "autonomous" explosion —which probably reached its climax in Italy in 1977— failed to converge, and following the breakdown of the movement (in the form of the critique of everyday life, the ideologies of desire, feminism and a variety of alternative social projects) all that it left behind was an abstract insistence on autonomy, reduced in turn to a mere form devoid of any content. Thus, the choice with which the movement that had begun in 1968 was faced with was the following: to either mask in one way or another the real issues posed by the hierarchical segmentation of the proletariat, while simultaneously extolling the "pluralism" of the new forms of resistance and proclaiming that, henceforth, abstract labor encompassed all social practices (the routes taken, respectively, by postmodernism and post-*operaista* triumphalism), or to drain the bitter chalice of defeat and adopt perspectives bordering on the "renouncement of the theory of the proletariat" proposed by Camatte (such was to be the case of the future founders of the Encyclopédie des Nuisances or the Primitivists). Thus, in "Prolétariat et Révolution" (1975), Camatte volunteered the following historical assessment:

We have already indicated the point of departure: locating the limits of the theory of the proletariat on the historical plane, that is, verifying, on the one hand, how, in the course of this century's revolutionary struggles, the proletariat did not ultimately propose a different way of life or society, but merely called for a different form of management of capital, and that, therefore, its intervention was limited to favoring the transition from the formal to the real domination of capital over society in the most advanced areas of the West and to reinforcing its worldwide domination, allowing it to penetrate areas in which it had not yet been able to enter due to resistances of a geographical, historical or social order. [...] For that very reason, historical study acquired a different dimension: to verify to what extent the majority of revolutionaries had lived and fought under the influence of a certain representation of the proletariat as a revolutionary class and were themselves imbued with a representation of "communist society" that was not incompatible with the being of capital.

The misfortunes of fetishism

In any case, several years before undertaking such a sobering diagnosis, Camatte had understood that it was imperative to resume the critique of political economy by adopting a periodization that reflected

the way in which all spheres of social life had been subordinated to the overall reproduction process of the capitalist system:

The starting point of the critique of current capitalist society must be the reassertion of the concepts of formal and real domination as the historical phases of capitalist development. Any other periodization of the process of the autonomization of value, such as competitive, monopoly, state, bureaucratic, etc., capitalism, abandons the domain of the theory of the proletariat —that is, the critique of political economy— and belongs to the vocabulary of the praxis of social democracy, or Leninist ideology codified by Stalinism. ("Transition", 1970)

During the transition to real domination, the workers' movement had theorized the epiphenomena of the state's subordination to the valorization process by resorting to categories such as state capitalism, organized capitalism or bureaucratic capitalism, which inevitably led, in consequence, to conceive of the overcoming of capitalism as a fundamentally political process in which organization was the essential issue.[15] This, in turn, allowed completely dispensing with the unpleasant reality owing to which, as a result of capital being nothing other than "the moving contradiction", any form of organization which presumably intends to transcend that contradiction must, of necessity, also reproduce it. This was something that, albeit in a limited fashion, the Johnson-Forest Tendency had already understood many years before:

And at each successive stage the degeneration of the proletarian party not only imitates capitalism but must take on to a greater degree the contradictions which are rending capitalism. (The Invading Socialist Society, p. 8)

According to Camatte, another peculiarity of the theoretical cycle that, coinciding with the transition to the initial stage of real domination, was inaugurated by Lukács and closed by the Situationists, was the great importance ascribed to the critique of the commodity and its fetishism at the expense of the analysis of capital as a whole. While it is undeniable that the commodity does indeed summarize the capitalist mode of production, when it comes to phenomena such as crises, restructurings and turning points in the system's trajectory, it becomes essential to deal with the mediations it goes through. Given that capitalist production is a simultaneous process of production of surplus value and reproduction of the social relations that allow the former to be produced, it is essential to bear in mind the process —always conflictual and in fact not very "automatic" at all— of accumulation and valorization as a whole.[16]

Now then, the "protagonists" of a crisis theory that would culminate in a "real movement that transforms existing conditions" can only be social beings endowed with determinations that render them antagonistic to capital (that is, it presupposes a theory of the proletariat) because, should it be referred merely to the individual or to humanity in general, that would make it meaningless and would inevitably result in updated repetitions of the old social democratic catastrophism liable to serve similar purposes.[17]

What is certain, moreover, is that the history of the Marxian theory of crises represents more than a mere succession of erroneous interpretations or frustrated expectations: it also reveals a process of increasing concretion in the perception of the capital relation itself. Contrary to how things might seem at first sight, there is a notable difference between the Second International's classical catastrophist theories —which saw in crises the motor of revolution and of a growing awareness that would pave the way to the "final struggle"— and the theory of the "decadence of capitalism" developed by the

revolutionary elements of the first proletarian assault against class society (Lenin, Luxemburg, the Italian Left Communists, the KAPD). Although the latter also betrays the fact that Marxist theorists were still dominated by the perspective of capital[18] , the mere act of linking crisis theory to the debate on organization as a process that was inseparable from the "real movement", in the context of the debate on the mass strike inaugurated by the Russian revolution of 1905 (in contrast to the organizational fetishism of the German social democratic party and its trade union apparatus, which identified its own survival with the "advance toward socialism") opened up the first great breach in the mechanistic and positivist outlook of "orthodox Marxism".

Otherwise, the objectivist notion of economics argued for in the debates of the historical "ultra-left" of the 1930s left the old dispute between the supporters of the "autonomous development of proletarian subjectivity" and those who believed that "revolutionary consciousness" could only be brought about by the cyclical crises inherent to the capitalist system (embodied respectively in the figures of Pannekoek and Grossman) intact. Hence, after the Second World War, when capitalism entered one of its most sustained phases of expansion, and objectivism became an ever greater obstacle to understanding the new situation, minorities emerged that focused their attention naturally on the novelties of the concrete evolution of the class struggle instead of insisting on following the course of the ups and downs of an economy separated from it.

Already in 1950, in *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, C.L.R. James, R. Dunayevskaya and G. Lee had indicated, in the course of their analysis of what would later become known as "Fordism", that:

Ford's regime before unionization is the prototype of production relations in fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia. But —and without this, all Marxism is lost— inextricably intertwined with the totalitarian tendency is the response of the working class. A whole new layer of workers, the result of economic development, burst into revolt in the CIO. (p. 40)

The very context in which the class struggle was now taking place tended, therefore, to deobjectivize the conception of the economy. However, since this deobjectification did not come to completion, it led to a subjectivist rejection of objectivism that put the proletariat in the forefront, turning it into the only active factor in the development of capitalism and its crises, which was "what Chalieu-Castoriadis was thinking when he said that Marx forgot to mention the class struggle in his book, *Capital*." (J. Camatte, "The KAPD and the Proletarian Movement", 1971).

Having said that, to maintain that the crises of capital are caused by the autonomous activity of the proletariat instead of insisting that it is the crises of capital that force the proletariat to react does not amount to abandoning the objectivist perspective, but to merely inverting it by adding a subjective determination to objectivity. And since "autonomist" theorists continued to consider the relationship between capital and the working class as a relation of exteriority rather than as a contradictory relationship of reciprocal implication, they tended to develop the notion of two independent subjects — capital and labor— and consequently, the idea of a confrontation between two strategies, which meant forgetting that

[...] It is no longer a matter of supporting either of the two poles or aspects of capital; what we have to do is to destroy both of them. In this sense, the autonomy of the working class is an empty demand if it is not posed in the context of the process of suppression of that class. (J. Camatte, "The KAPD and the Proletarian Movement", 1971).

However, and although they occasionally made a rather lax and sociological use of concepts such as "class composition" and "recomposition" to dereify categories such as the organic composition of capital, "autonomist" theorists used them to better understand the forms of struggle and subjectivity that accompany a given composition, as well as the specific roots of the rejection or decline of certain forms of organization. In any case, and to sum up, "we might say that just as '68 showed both the limitations as well as the validity of Situationist ideas, the period of crisis and revolutionary activity in Italy during the decade of 1969-1979 showed the validity and limitation of the workerists' and autonomists' theory." ("Decadence: The Theory of decline or the decline of theory?", part 2, Aufheben, 1994)

Camatte and Invariance's evolution, however, took a very different course. In stating that the theory of value had in some way been overcome by the development of fictitious capital, both the crisis theory based on it and the theory of the proletariat became groundless. From the moment in which one concludes that capital has been abstractly "unified" and has reabsorbed social classes, the only possible conflict remaining is a struggle between an abstract humanity and the "material community", the continued existence of which now demands an anthropological explanation. Unlike classical revolutionary theory, which attributed the survival of capitalism to causes that remained somehow external to the "revolutionary subject" (imperialism, social democracy, Stalinism, etc.), Invariance attempted to explain it in terms of the assimilation of humanity's "communal being" (the Gemeinwesen) by capital and advocated "secession" as a necessary premise of the break with capital, which translates to replacing the real movements of an international proletariat immersed in very specific historical problems (growing levels of social exclusion, for example) with an indeterminate revolt of "humanity".

Now, as Ray Brassier says in "The Wandering Abstraction":[19]

There is a straightforward rejoinder to Camatte's account: his appeal to a human community whose basic expressive modalities remain constant across millennia of social and historical transformation is an abstraction in the most problematic sense. Camatte hypostatises a set of human expressive capacities that persist not only independently of capitalism but of every form of social organisation: "creating", "producing", and "using" are postulated as invariants of human life as such. [...] Moreover, the affirmation of community over society unwittingly echoes a familiar reactionary trope: while community ensures that social roles, values, and beliefs remain firmly rooted in interpersonal relations, society jeopardises these by instituting impersonal roles, formal values, and objective beliefs on the basis of indirect interactions. Here Camatte's denunciation of the despotism of capital shades into a repudiation of modernity, which becomes a cipher for humanity's wandering away from its authentic communality.

This contrasts sharply with the analysis of contemporary social reality offered, for example, by the British "communizer" group Endnotes. By remaining within the framework of a crisis theory based on the value-form, its general diagnosis of the situation coincides with that of the representatives of the "critique of value", but with a fundamental difference: for Endnotes the effects of the current crisis on class relations do not constitute a separate element of their description of that reality.

Thus capital's accumulation of an ever-growing surplus value is accompanied by an ever-growing "surplus population" excluded from the process of production. The proletariat becomes "that which is produced by capital without producing capital." The result is the disintegration of the proletariat's self-

identification as producers of capital. It becomes impossible for the working class to affirm itself assuch in its antagonism with capital. This is why communization can no longer be conceived as the end result of the workers' revolutionary seizure of the means of production. It must be reconceived as an intransitive process, an immanent movement which consists in destroying the relation through which capital reproduces labor while labor reproduces capital.[20]

On the other hand, there is a second and more substantial objection to be made both to *Invariance*'s thesis and the "critique of value":

[...] the process of fetishization of capital, of its autonomization, cannot be actualised. Thus, Marx's discovery of the double character of labor is indeed decisive, but it is a matter of seeing what it means; the meaning of this discovery, which implies the need for the capitalist phenomenon to split into an apparent dimension and a real one, may, in my opinion, be summed up in the affirmation that fetishism is already contradictory per se.[21]

The tacit presupposition of Camatte's entire analysis of "anthropomorphosis" and the constitution of the "material community" is the identification of the apparent movement of the autonomization of capital —its reification or fetishism— with its real movement, and in that respect, it should be noted that Invariance turned a contradictory trend into a fait accompli, and consequently failed to sufficiently recognize the open character of the constant struggle characteristic of this process.

The missing link of contemporary social criticism, then, is the inseparable character of the theory of value and the theory of the proletariat (conceived of more as a contradictory bearer of all separations than as the abstract bearer of their overcoming), and the union of both in a theory of crisis linked to the concrete configuration of the capitalist social relationship. Little does it matter that, for historical reasons that are easy enough to explain, and without intending to detract from the interest of his subsequent evolution, Jacques Camatte renounced both: what remains fundamental is that he highlighted their indissoluble unity, and that he did so within the framework of a radical critique of the fetishism of organization, of representation as the essence of politics and of racketeering as ways of life of present-day capitalist society.

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Notes

1. The name of the review was a reference to the "invariance of the theory of the proletariat", one of the mainstays of the Italian Communist Left, a.k.a "Bordigism". When Camatte and Co.'s detractors pointed out that "nothing varies as much as *Invariance*", he and his comrades replied that "what is invariant is the aspiration to rediscover the lost human community", thus emphasizing the other guiding thread of his investigations, humanity's *Gemeinwesen* (community).

2. The English term *racket* refers, in principle, to any grouping involved in organized crime, but by extension it may be considered to embody the real and necessary modus operandi or prototype of any "organization" within the framework of existing society. Bordiga linked the notion of the gang to the critique of the idea of the bureaucracy as a new ruling class propounded by Chalieu-

Castoriadis. Theodor W. Adorno first took an interest in this matter regarding the Marxist theory of classes in "Reflections on the theory of classes" (1942), and returned to it in "Individual and Organization" (1953), as well as in "Marginal Notes on Theory and Practice" (1969). It also figures prominently in two articles published in *Internationale situationniste #4* and *#7*, "Gangland et Philosophie" (1960) and "Geopolitique de la hibernation" (1962). There is also an excellent and documented article on the subject, "Rackets", by F. Palinorc in http://www.left-dis.nl/ .

3. It is quite significant that the only *Invariance* text translated into Spanish for many years was *Comunidad y comunismo en Rusia* (Madrid, Zero-zyx 1975), an in-depth study of the "Russian question" (with which Camatte insisted that it was urgent to "cut the umbilical cord").

4. In arguing that class struggle is unable to do anything other than to reproduce capitalism and "modernize" it (which turns class struggle into a subordinate factor devoid of any further historical interest), Postone and the *Krisis* group's theory of the "automatic subject" also implicitly states that the subject of any potential opposition can only be the individual or an abstract humanity. Camatte, on the other hand, sees the "anthropomorphosis" of capital as the terminal stage of the evolution of the capital relation, and thus pays the utmost attention (at least until he came to consider that its historical outcome had come to completion) to all the transformations and ups and downs of that struggle.

5. There is a clear parallelism between the "crisis of programmatism" (that is, of any notion of the overcoming of capitalism based on the transformation of the proletariat into the ruling class) inaugurated by May '68, and the opposition —theorized by the exponents of "Wertkritik" and the Postone school— between an "exoteric Marx" (who criticized capitalism "from the standpoint of labor") and an "esoteric Marx" (who criticized labor under capitalism, that is, as one of its constituent elements). However, it is one thing to explain this turning point as a result of the historical evolution of the capitalist system itself and quite another to explain it as some type of deplorable straying issuing from an "erroneous" reading which has now —finally— been corrected. Having said that, when, at the beginning of *Adventures of the Commodity*, Anselm Jappe poses the need to "historicize Marx's theory, as well as traditional Marxism" by relating them to "two different historical stages: modernization and its overcoming" (p. 12), he not only takes the validity of both these notions for granted, but a few pages later, he also passes over the opportunity to historicize "Wertkritik" itself supporting his thesis with the dates he himself provides: "The background of the critique of value lies in the 1920's, in G. Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and I. Rubin's *Essays on the Theory of Value*. It proceeded implicitly in the writings of T. Adorno, and its real birth can be located around 1968, when in different countries (Germany, Italy, United States), authors such as H.-J. Krahl, H.-G. Backhaus, L. Coletti and F. Perlman worked around the same subject." (p. 20). The question that needs to be posed is precisely whether these two fundamental categories of the "critique of value" —"traditional Marxism" and "modernization"— would survive such a historicization.

6. (Rupture dans la théorie de la révolution, texts introduced by François Danel, Ed. Senonevero, Paris 2003). This did not prevent the Councilist tendencies of the day from stubbornly defending the self-management program and insisting that the autonomy of workers' struggles, their self-organization outside and against unions, was the necessary and sufficient criterion to determine whether or not they were on the right track. "Hence the uproar and the shock caused by Jean Barrot's (Gilles Dauvé's) text Leninism and the ultra-left in 1972, and the rejection of its author by the Councilists, who could not tolerate this critique, let alone Dauvé's attempt to adopt elements of Bordiga's theory, whom the Councilist current had reduced rather hastily to

an ultra-Leninist theoretician." (François Bochet, " A propos de quelques textes récents: Anselm Jappe, Jaime Semprun, Robert Kurz, Jean-Marc Mandosio")

7. Although the concepts espoused by the Johnson-Forest Tendency (C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee) and those of *S. ou B.* were very similar, there was also a fundamental difference: according to the Johnson-Forest Tendency, the Stalinist bureaucracy was "the organic product of the development attained by capitalism and the political form adequate to the final stage of the capitalist system, State Capitalism" (*The Invading Socialist Society*, p. *ii*), from which it followed —for them— that the problem "is not to be solved through of the analysis of 'bureaucracies', but by the analysis of capital". (Ibid., p.16)

8. We might consider this the true "birth certificate" of the "veritable split" between proto-communizing tendencies and the myriad "autonomies" that were to take over preaching the emancipatory virtues of radical politics and super-duper direct democracy from soon to be obsolete leftist groupings. Over the years, the false problem of the bureaucracy became increasingly relegated due to the convergence of two intimately linked phenomena: the entry of capitalism in its "neoliberal" stage (along with the subsequent collapse of "really existing socialism") and the gradual conversion of the old leftists to the assemblyist gospel of "horizontality" (regarding this "debureaucratization of the world", see Loren Goldner's texts "A Short History of the World Working-Class Movement from Lassalle to Neo-Liberalism: The Distorting Hegemony of the Unproductive Middle Classes", "Multi-Culturalism or World Culture?: On a 'Left'-Wing Response to Contemporary Social Breakdown", "Post-Modernism Meets the IMF: The Case of Poland", and "Facing Reality 45 Years Later: Critical Dialogue with James/Lee/Chaulieu".

9. "Youth, workers, people of color, homosexuals, women and children want everything that has been forbidden them \[...\] Every area of a social space that has been increasingly fashioned by alienated production and its planners today becomes a new field of struggle, from primary school to public transportation, psychiatric asylums, and prisons. "("Theses on the Situationist International and its Time", in *The Veritable Split in the International*, Chronos Publications, translated by Christopher Winks and Lucy Forsyth)

10. "Una aproximación crítica a *Historia y conciencia de clase*", [in *Contra la razón destructiva*, Tusquets, Barcelona 1979].

11. Around the same time, former MIL (Iberian Liberation Movement) theoretician Santi Soler wrote: "\[...\] all that stuff the Situationists wrote about proletarians being 'those who lack any power to decide over their own life and know it', as Debord said, does not refer to specific social categories \[...\] but rather boils down to drowning in the Lukacsian Maelstrom of 'class consciousness'." (Marxismo: señas de identidad, Ediciones Libertarias, Madrid 1980, p.71).

12. Jean-Pierre Voyer, Une Enquête sur la nature et les causes of the misère des gens, Champ Libre 1976, pp. 111-113. Or also, put in less convoluted terms: \[...\] To become a revolutionary class, the proletariat must unite, but now it cannot unite but by destroying the conditions of its own existence as a class. Unification is not a means to make the struggle for demands more effective; on the contrary, it can only exist by overcoming the struggle for demands; the content of unification is that proletarians devote all their efforts to ceasing to be proletarians; it is the calling into question of its own existence as a class by the proletariat, the communization of relations among individuals. As proletarians, they cannot find in capital, that is, in themselves, anything other than all of the divisions of wage labor and exchange, and no organizational or

political form can overcome this division. (Roland Simon, “Unification du prolétariat et communisation”,

13. “À propos de la dictature du prolétariat” (1978)
14. “The New Movement”, H. Simon, Échanges et mouvement. Text included in Apuntes sobre la autonomía obrera, Ediciones Etcétera, Barcelona 1979, pp. 3-6.
15. In a footnote of *Adventures of the Commodity* in which he criticizes the “sometimes obsessive emphasis placed by the radical left on organizational issues” and the vicissitudes of the definition of the bureaucracy as an exploitative and parasitic class, Anselm Jappe points out, quite rightly, that “although accurate as a description, this explanation could have found much better support in Robert Michels, Wilfredo Pareto or Max Weber than in Marx” (p. 181). Moreover, Jappe evaluates the “critical Marxism” of the 1950s and 1960s (the direct forerunner of contemporary post-workerism) in almost “Bordigist” terms when he underlines the “distinct tendency” of this current “to reinterpret Marx’s theory in light of the bourgeois notion of democracy”, and adds that “what all these theories have in common is the fact that they never refer to the Marxian critique of value and the commodity, let alone assign them a central role.” (p. 25)
16. “\[…\] if antagonism has any meaning, at the heart of the category \[of value\] there must be an element of uncertainty, of openness. To say that social relations are antagonistic is to say that they are developed through struggle, and that therefore they can never be considered as predetermined. To understand value, therefore, we must open the category completely, understand value as struggle, as a struggle of which we are inevitably part.” (J. Holloway, “Crisis, Fetishism, Class Composition”, in *Open Marxism*, p. 158). One of the distinctive features of Postone and the Krisis group is precisely their refusal to recognize the antagonistic character of this process, or at least that the fundamental mainspring of its dissolution lies in this antagonistic character, which leads them, if not to deny the class struggle any emancipatory character at all, at least to accuse it of a fatal propensity to breed the scapegoats that the system needs to ensure its perpetuation. According to Camatte, on the other hand, this tendency does not arise from the class struggle per se, but from the racket-gang logic tending to pervade every “organization” constituted in society as it stands, which, in the political sphere, for example, results in continuous processes of “accountability/purges” (sometimes “civilized”, sometimes bloody) as a fictitious form of solving insoluble contradictions.
17. On the various functions performed by the theory of crisis in the labor movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, see G. Marramao’s article “The Theories of Collapse and Organized Capitalism in the Debates of Historical Extremism”.
18. “‘The ruling ideas of each epoch are the ideas of its ruling class’ does not simply mean that those ideas are physically the most widespread or the most widely accepted. It also means they tend to be assented to, partially and unconsciously, by the very people who oppose them the most violently.” (Cardan-Castoriadis, *S. ou B.* No. 27, “Proletariat and Organisation”)
19. Ray Brassier, "Wandering Abstraction" MetaMute 2014
20. Ibid.
21. Pier Aldo Rovati, “La crítica del fetichismo en el “Fragmento sobre las máquinas” de los Grundrisse”, en Progreso técnico y desarrollo capitalista, Ed. Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente nº 93, México 1982, pp. 209-210.